

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS A NEW INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY ON PIRENNE

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Findings of the Pirenne-colloquium

The Pirenne-colloquium organized in 2009 can be regarded as the provisional tail of a long series of commemorations and reflections about the life and work of Henri Pirenne since his decease in 1935. Most of these events were concentrated around the “anniversary dates” of his birth, death or highlights in his professional career and found their expression in a publication of the speeches, lectures and conclusions of the colloquia organised for those occasions.¹ Together with historical research out of the commemorative context, these colloquia shed new light on the work and life of the Belgian historian. They prove that Pirenne continues to inspire scholars, that (some of) his work remains relevant, but also that – despite the relatively large amount of studies published about the historian – there is still much left to be (re)examined.

In this volume, the authors have tried to address some of those issues.

It has been shown here that Pirennes writing has substantially influenced the development of the economic and social sciences, even though he considered them as auxiliary to the historical discipline. He contributed to the development of economic history as a mature discipline. He also helped to introduce the study of laws and processes in history, heavily inspired as he was by positivist German historiography. Nevertheless, Pirenne was more a political and a social than an economic historian, and his economic theory was deterministic and incomplete.

As for his professional success, it has been made clear that Pirenne was much indebted to his former teachers Godefroid Kurth, Karl Lamprecht and Paul Fredericq. They activated their extended networks to promote their (former) students’ career, they intellectually inspired his

¹ See for example Despy & Verhulst (1986) or Bierlaire (1987).

methods and research topics... and they witnessed how Pirenne easily outflanked them. But the tradition of 'community building' and networking was not lost on Pirenne. In his turn, he used his influence, knowledge and stature to support the careers of his most promising pupils, as the chapters on Guillaume Des Marex and Hendrik De Man reveal.

In doing so, he came to be considered as the godfather of the 'Ghent Historical School', one of many 'myths' to be constructed around the famous historian. The myth of Pirenne as a national icon turned out to be the most persistent one, even though it is shown in this volume that the historian was more a commemorative opportunist who frequented national events, more an ardent patriot. Pirenne had a cosmopolitan, not a nationalistic perspective in mind when he spoke of Belgium. This didn't stop him, however, from being generally considered as the country's 'scientific hero'.

The question of Pirenne's self-fashioning: the myth of the modern historian

But what was Pirenne's contribution to this image? In what way did he actively direct his career in a certain direction? How did he manage to gain social status and professional success? Pirenne's 'self-fashioning' is a compelling subject still awaiting comprehensive scholarly research.²

As a starting point for such research, the generally accepted myth of Pirenne's 'modernism' offers an interesting perspective. Hailed as one of the most noted and 'modern' historians who inexhaustibly provided the discipline with new oxygen, new disciples and new perspectives, Pirenne was also 'mainstream' enough to be able, early in his career already, to occupy key nodes in professional networks³, to gain social capital, and to even be successful as an 'intellectual broker' between the academic and the popular sphere⁴. Furthermore, he managed to retain his status as a 'renewer' not only during his entire career, but even decades after his death.

² I am currently working on a PhD project, initiated in 2011 (UGent), to address the question of Pirenne's self-fashioning. The working title is 'The Pirenne phenomenon. The construction of status in the transition from traditional to modern historiography'.

³ For an overview of his numerous appointments, memberships and presidencies, see the list in *Hommages et Souvenirs* (1938).

⁴ As a gifted narrator, a talented lecturer and a widely respected public figure, Pirenne became one of those rare historians able to captivate the interest of scientific and non-scientific audiences alike.

Writing on Pirenne has largely confirmed this portrait of him, though scholarship has also revealed contradictions and distortions in this image.

Pyenson and Verbruggen (2011) for instance, recently called Pirenne ‘an apostle of modernism’ because of his ‘genuine openness to innovation, the key sign of modernism’. By contrast, Tollebeek (2008, this volume) thinks Pirenne's historiographic approach was less modern than that of his colleague Paul Fredericq, although Pirenne was more proficient in accumulating social capital. For Cantor (1991, 130), the modernity of Pirenne was that he gained new audiences for historical studies with his synthetic style and bold ideas: “What was most important about Pirenne was not what he specifically said (...), but how he said it. It was his method and style that counted. He accumulated a very small body of material, enough to provide a modicum of respectable footnotes, and above the footnotes he speculated very broadly. Pirenne’s message was that there was an audience for large-scale generalization in medieval history, and this audience was much larger than the thin array of professional mediaevalists. If you presented plausible interpretations of a sweeping nature about medieval economy and society, the learned world and, even to some extent, the educated world beyond universities would listen, and you would become famous, honored, and affluent. Think big, write boldly. This lesson was not lost on contemporaries, including Louis Halphen and Marc Bloch. Pirenne told mediaevalists to dare to be bold and speculative”. For other authors then again, it were Pirenne’s innovating ideas on the rise of capitalism, the development of medieval cities and the role of Islam on Western history that were particularly modern.

A case study for the shift from traditional to modern historiography

From around 1880 onward, an international process of modernisation and scientific progress was changing academic instruction and research which likewise affected the historical sciences. Why is it that Pirenne, of all people, was able to present and maintain himself as a successful innovator, even if his colleagues had equal access to education? Instead of being derided for his innovation as was Lamprecht in Germany (Chickering 1993, Warland 2010), Pirenne secured enough status and social capital to be acknowledged as a ‘modern historian’ already early in his career. How did he accomplish this status, and gain such international attention? How did the

image of the modern Pirenne evolve during his career, to that extent that his fame is still secure today?

Finding an answer to these questions will not only help us to 'deconstruct' the Pirenne phenomenon and shed light on the process of academic self-fashioning. Because of his exceptional status in a crucial juncture in historiography, Pirenne can also tell us much about the transition from traditional to modern historical writing that began in the 1880s.

The 'modernity' of Pirenne is, in other words, a pertinent question for European historiography as a whole. The personal development of Pirenne as a historian reflects more general intellectual and social shifts. The modernisation of historiography in Belgium was just taking off when Pirenne began studying at the University of Liège in 1879. In fact, Pirenne was one of the first to have a taste of the modern seminar system and to undergo scientific training abroad at the model countries of the time, France and Germany. If professionalization, the growing prestige for researchers and the development of international networks were characteristic of modern science (Tollebeek 2008), during his career Pirenne was an enthusiastic student in each of these fields. For the development of Belgium from a young construction without a strong identity to a nation that was ambitious, international in outlook and firmly-rooted in history, Pirenne's *Histoire de Belgique* was crucial (De Schaepdrijver 2007). The Great War transformed Pirenne into a national icon and a politically deployable 'model Belgian'. That status assured him of enormous influence and recognition, but also undermined to some extent the image of Pirenne as a historiographic innovator. His nearly obsessive quest, from 1922 until the year of his death in 1935, for evidence for his *Mahomet et Charlemagne*-thesis, served as a means for him to (re)define himself as such. Pirenne's influential address on comparative history during the International Historical Congress of 1923, at the peak of his fame as a national historian, in a climate of hypernationalism and notwithstanding his exclusion of German historians from the congress, can also be seen in this light (Verhulst 2001). As lobbyist, fundraiser and inspirator for the *Annales* review, founded in 1929 by Bloch and Fèbvre, Pirenne characterized himself once again as the flag-bearer of the new, comparative history, even if recent research has shown that Pirenne in this time period was more occupied with the maintenance of his reputation and his international (overseas) network than with the methodological renewal of his discipline (Harvey 2004).

The persistence of an image

However, for several reasons the image of Pirenne as a dynamic renewer remained practically undamaged after his death. Firstly, as Tollebeek already pointed out in this volume under the significant title ‘The power of a legend’, the part Pirenne (is thought to have) played in the creation of the *Annales* created the danger of a deterministic reading of his work and his historiographical practice, since “precisely because *Annales* history was attributed such a radically innovative, modern role in twentieth-century European historiography, the “forerunner” of the *Annales* historians could also be regarded as modern”. Secondly, and supplementary to what Raxhon outlines in this volume, the historian has become the subject of a flourishing culture of remembrance: periodically, institutions and cities honor ‘their’ famous historian in order to attract some attention. On these occasions, the master narrative of the ‘genius historian’ and the ‘historiographic innovator’ is uncritically reproduced, as it is not only flattering for the master, but also for the institutions and cities that helped bringing him forth. Thirdly, Pirenne’s work continues to be ‘rediscovered’ and ‘claimed’ by new theories and research fields. Especially noticeable in this context is the interest in Pirenne’s *Mahomet et Charlemagne* within the fields of World History and World-Systems Theory⁵. The use of Pirenne’s work as an important reference in these new disciplines and theories also adds to its modern character.

Towards a new intellectual biography

The question of Pirenne’s ‘modernity’ thus offers an interesting research perspective for a new synthesis of his life and work - one that questions and analyses the role of the historian in the development, evolution and consolidation of his status (the question of Pirenne’s self-fashioning), and situating it in the broader, international tendencies of scientific professionalisation.

Such a study does not yet exist. The biography on Pirenne by Lyon (1974) was written more than 35 years ago as an almost hagiographic ‘ode to the master’. It paid little or no attention to the influence of international schools of thought on Pirenne’s work or the importance of professional and political networks in the establishment of Pirenne’s remarkable career, despite the fact that critical sounds were arising since publication of the famous article of Dhondt (1966). Research since then, however relevant to readjust the prevailing image of the historian, has always been

⁵ See the article of Thoen and Vanhaute in this volume.

thematically narrow: it limited its focus to specific subjects such as the influence of Pirenne on the development of the *Annales* (for example Harvey 2004), Pirenne's part in the construction of the Belgian national master narrative (for example van Sas in Frank & Hadler, 2011, 152-174), the impact of World War I on the work of Henri Pirenne (for example Schöttler in Berger & Lorenz, 2011, 404-425) or the importance of the scientific legacy of Pirenne for the discipline of urban history (Boone and Billen 2010, Boone 2011). A general and synthetic overview of Pirenne's life and work will be published in 2012 by Leuven Academia Press and Cornell University Press under the title *Henri Pirenne, historian: a life in pictures* (Tollebeek & Keymeulen). Yet, the broader story, the 'intellectual biography' of the young and ambitious student who turned himself into 'the' Pirenne historians in Belgium and abroad still admire today - the 'myth' as Prevenier calls him in this issue, the 'phenomenon' as Jan Dhondt already labelled him in the 1960's – largely remains untold...

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